

Does the messenger matter?

A comparison of the effects of Euroskeptic messages communicated by mainstream and radical right-wing parties on citizens' EU attitudes

ABSTRACT

The fact that the European elections in 2014 resulted in an unprecedented success for Euroskeptic parties raises questions concerning the influence of political elites on citizens' Euroskepticism. This paper examines whether Euroskeptic messages have a different impact when communicated by mainstream right-wing parties versus their more radical counterparts. We do so using data from a survey experiment conducted in Germany in 2013. Our results show that Euroskeptic messages from mainstream parties significantly increase Euroskepticism among voters but that those effects are confined largely to 'in'-partisans. Furthermore, when a message is effective among 'out'-partisans, it is due to a combined effect of source and message credibility. This holds true for both mainstream and radical right parties suggesting that contrary to expectations, the former do not enjoy any advantage over the latter in terms of perceived credibility.

Keywords: Campaign Advertisements, Euroskepticism, Survey Experiment, Party Identification, Source Credibility, Message Credibility

Introduction

In the light of citizens' decreasing support of the European Union and evidence from current research showing that political elites do shape citizens' EU-attitudes, this paper aims at answering the question whether Euroskeptic party advertisements have a different impact when communicated by mainstream parties compared to parties with radical ideologies. For a long time, EU integration has been regarded as an elite project resting on citizens' "permissive consensus" (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970). However, public support for EU integration has been waning (e.g., De Vries and Edwards 2009), especially in times of financial and economic crisis (e.g., Armingeon and Ceka 2014; also see Eurobarometer 2014), and has recently even resulted in the majority of British people voting to leave the Union. We know that economic factors, identity-related considerations, and evaluations of the own national state, which are also attributed to the EU, shape citizens' EU attitudes (Armingeon and Ceka 2014; Hobolt and Wratil 2015; Hooghe and Marks 2005). However, these forces do not develop in a vacuum. Instead, research has shown that it is elites, i.e. parties and mass media, with their cues and arguments that shape citizens' attitudes (Zaller 1992). As most people only learn about matters of EU integration from public discourse, it is this publicly visible information provided by the elites, which has shown to be important for EU attitude formation (Maier and Rittberger 2008, 2012; De Vries and Edwards 2009; Ray 2003; Steenbergen et al. 2007).

Against the backdrop of citizens' declining EU support and elites' influence on citizens' EU attitudes, we ask which political elites are potentially able to have a significant negative impact on EU support. We thereby differentiate between the effectiveness of *different messengers* in communicating identical EU-skeptical messages, i.e. mainstream right-wing parties as compared to parties with radical ideologies. To answer our research question, we draw on and develop the literature on party affiliation as a heuristic or cue for voters. We develop this research in three main ways. First, we extend the focus beyond mainstream parties to include smaller, more radical parties. In this regard, we are able to connect to newer research that seeks to understand how cue-effectiveness varies among parties (Brader et al. 2012; Coan et al. 2008; Merolla et al. 2008). Second, we extend the focus geographically beyond the U.S. which has been a focal point for much of the research to date (Bullock, 2011; Sniderman, 2000). Finally, we examine the causal mechanism behind the effects of party messages by differentiating between effects that are based on partisanship and source credibility and those based on message credibility, i.e. independent of source. The findings are important in that they allow us to better identify those sections of the electorate that are most likely to be affected by Euroskeptic messages if that message is communicated by a mainstream or a radical party.

We have chosen Germany as the subject for empirical analysis because it has a comparatively EU-friendly climate, which allows us to observe *the emergence* of Euroskeptic attitudes. Among many other European countries this process is already in full flow (see Eurobarometer 2013), and we would expect it to be more difficult to observe effects from just one experimental treatment in such environments. Germany is one of the few European countries with no major anti EU-party – at least until 2013 when the fieldwork for this analysis was completed – and with citizens supporting EU integration to a greater extent than the average European (according to Eurobarometer, in 2013 68% of Germans agreed that EU-membership was a good thing compared to an EU-average of 50%). In this EU-friendly setting, we conducted an online survey experiment on the effect of a strongly Euroskeptic message – in one case communicated by a challenger party with a radical ideology (Die Republikaner) and in the other case communicated by a mainstream party (CSU, the Bavarian sister party of the ruling CDU in Germany, which belongs to the strongly pro-European group of Christian Democrats in the European Union; see Crum 2007).

To answer our research question regarding messenger effects, we proceed in four steps. First, on the basis of literature on parties as cue-givers, we derive hypotheses about the effectiveness of Euroskeptic messages communicated by different messengers. Second, we describe our experimental design, fieldwork, and the operationalization of the

dependent and independent variables. We then turn to the empirical findings which are discussed in the results section. Finally, we summarize the study and discuss the potential areas for future research as well as possible study limitations.

Effectiveness of parties' cues on in-partisans and out-partisans

Party cues and in-partisans – the role of party identification

In their classical account of the American Voter, Campbell et al. (1960) already pointed out the relevance of parties as messengers or as sources of information. As a consequence of citizens' identification with a specific party, this party serves as “a supplier of cues by which the individual may evaluate the elements of politics” (Campbell et al. 1960, 128). If a new political issue arises, they use the party cues as shortcuts in order to choose a political position and cast their vote, although they often do not understand the underlying complex policy issues. These assumptions regarding the functions of party cues for party identifiers, later on called “in-partisans” (see also Zaller 1992), rest on a core finding of social psychology, namely that in-groups define the very meaning of objects (e.g., Cohen 2003; Tajfel et al. 1971): One follows those individuals whose values and identities one shares.

A long tradition of empirical research has accumulated evidence for the relevance of partisan cues for party identifiers. They have been shown to influence attitudes towards

policy issues (e.g., Cohen 2003; Kam 2005) and to shape perceptions of candidates and their respective issue positions (e.g., Mondak 1993; Rahn 1993). Their effect on voting decisions has also been demonstrated (e.g., Lau and Redlawsk 2001). It has been shown that partisan cues have the capacity to overcome framing effects (Druckman 2001) and even to be effective in situations in which the content of a persuasive message is not in line with the preferred party's position. Cohen (2003, 819), for example, concludes from a series of experimental studies: "If information about the position of their party was available..., participants assumed that position as their own regardless of the content of the policy."

Although the general relevance of party cues has been proven, the *gradual effectiveness* of cues varies. This conditional nature of partisan cueing is on the top of today's research agenda. There are three, often overlapping, strands of research that seek to understand the conditions under which cueing is most effective. First, research focuses on the variation among *issues* and thereby often analyses the relative importance of partisan cues in comparison to the policy / issue information (for a summary, Bullock 2011). Some studies have demonstrated that cues seem to be more important for (complex) issues regarding on which people do not have fixed opinions (e.g., Arceneaux 2008; Coan 2008; Cohen 2003; Rahn 1993). Moreover, the amount of policy information also seems important: The more information is available, the stronger

people tend to rely on that information, thus lessening the relevance of cues (Bullock 2011).

Second, research also seeks to disentangle *individual differences* in cue effectiveness among partisans. Some authors claim that only less informed and low motivated persons follow cues; others find evidence that cues might not only be relevant for those unmotivated and less informed, but also for those who are motivated and highly politically aware (for a summary, see Bullock 2011). In this context, Arceneaux (2008) again emphasizes the role of cues in cases in which the information contradicts the partisan line. He finds that only highly aware partisans are likely to punish candidates who depart from their party's line when the issue is highly salient. In situations with low salience, even highly involved partisans follow cues that contradict their partisan line. Furthermore, it has been shown that highly aware citizens rely more heavily on party cues in ambivalent and unfamiliar situations (e.g., Chaiken and Maheswaran 1994; Zaller 1992) and that they are the most misinformed in situations where heuristics are inaccurate (Dancey and Sheagley 2013).

Third, research has highlighted *differences among parties* in setting cues effectively. The U.S. Democrats and Republicans have been in the focus of this research, and even in this two-party system with only mainstream parties being analysed, there is some

evidence that their cues differ in effectiveness (Bullock 2011): Republican voters were shown to be more strongly influenced by cues than Democrats. This influence was even higher on Republicans with higher levels of need for cognition, whereas it was weaker among Democrats with the same attributes. Empirical studies on parties other than U.S. mainstream parties are rare. One exception is the research by Merolla et al. (2008) who showed in Canada that only the party with the most distinct ideological program was effective in cue-setting across various issues. This finding is supported by research showing that opposition parties with a clear ideology are more effective in cue-setting compared to governing parties or parties with a less clear-cut ideology (Brader et al. 2012). Differences among parties are also emphasized by Coan et al. (2008), who showed that minor parties have more difficulty in effectively setting their cues. Finally, in his analysis of the conditional nature of partisan cues on EU attitudes, Ray (2003) also points to the relevance of a party-level factor: Parties that are united on the issue – in this case: EU integration – are more successful in effective cue-setting than parties that face inner-party struggles.

Party cues and out-partisans – comparing effects of source and message credibility

Although research mostly focuses on the effect of party cueing on the own partisan base (in-partisans), we know that party messages have the capacity to reach even further, influencing the attitudes of non-partisans (i.e. independents) as well as partisans from

other parties (for empirical evidence see, e.g., Maier et al. 2012, Slothuus and de Vreese 2010). In accordance with Zaller (1992, p. 250), we refer to both groups as “out-partisans” in this paper.

Following the most prominent cognitive models of persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo 1981; Chaiken 1980), we can distinguish two message-related drivers of attitude change: the argument itself and source cues, the most important being the sender of a message. The persuasive capacity of both aspects is influenced by credibility judgements. We therefore can distinguish message credibility and source credibility (Appelman and Sundar 2015; Metzger et al. 2003). Research on message credibility, defined as “the individual’s judgement of the veracity of the content of communication” (Appelman and Sundar 2015, 5), shows how the message structure, content, delivery, and style influence credibility judgements (for a summary, Metzger et al. 2003).

The more prominent strand of research, however, concerns source credibility. This research dates back to Hovland’s work (1954, 1971) which shows that “*who* says something is usually as important as *what* is said in the determination of the impact of a communication.” In the last decades, researchers have worked on understanding what source credibility is and how it impacts persuasion processes. Following Perloff (2003) and Jacob (2008) most researchers agree that (1) source credibility is not an attribute of

the source as such but results from the perceptions of the audience and that (2) it contains several dimensions. Therefore, source credibility encompasses at least two aspects: the perceived expertise (i.e. the knowledge, accuracy, and precision) and trustworthiness of the sender (i.e. the belief that the sender will act in the interest of the receiver; e.g., Kelman & Hovland 1953, for a summary, Rouner 2008).

Turning to the effects of source credibility, research has accumulated strong evidence for its impact on the persuasive capacity of a message, such as effects on attitudes and behavioural intentions (e.g., Hovland and Weiss 1951; Miller and Krosnick 2000; Druckman 2001; Kareklas et al. 2015; for a summary, Pornpitakpan 2004). It has been proven that people may reject messages from sources they regard as not credible (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Yet, researchers have been working on disentangling the conditional nature of such effects. First, there are individual-level variables that influence the magnitude of source credibility effects. Those willing and able to process information with high involvement rely less on source cues than those with low involvement (Petty and Cacioppo 1981; Chaiken 1980). However, Kumkale et al. (2010) claim that this effect can only be observed in situations in which people have not yet formed attitudes. In addition, Chaiken and Maheswaran (1994) qualify the original finding by showing that source credibility is not only important for those with low involvement, but also for those highly involved if they are exposed to ambiguous

messages. Second, it is the availability of information about the source that influences effects of source credibility. If information about sources is revealed too late, source credibility is of less importance (O’Keefe 2002). Finally, the stronger effects of highly credible sources seem to get weaker over the course of time as sources are forgotten or dissociated (for a summary of the sleeper effect, Schenk 2008).

To sum up, therefore, party messages are understood to work in a twofold manner: First, they will have the strongest influence on their own partisans (in-partisans). Here, party identification and attachment serve as information shortcuts. Second, party messages may also persuade out-partisans (i.e. non-partisans as well as partisans from other parties, see above) if they are judged credible. Credibility here can refer either to the sender (source credibility)¹ or to the argument (message credibility) presented. In order to fully understand the causal mechanism behind the impact of party messages and their wider implications for the electorate as a whole, it is thus important to distinguish between the effects of source and message credibility. Based on this reasoning, we now derive our hypotheses on the persuasive potential of mainstream and radical parties’ messages on in- and out-partisans.

Development of hypotheses

In our paper, we seek to look at the conditional nature of party cueing. Our main focus lies on the different capacities of mainstream and radical parties for cue-giving in multi-party systems. In such systems, we find not only a greater number, but often also ideologically more diverse parties. As a consequence, mainstream parties are often confronted with ideologically radical parties (Hobolt and De Vries 2011). Research so far (see above) shows that parties with distinct ideologies are better able to successfully provide cues to their partisans. However, we do not know whether this applies to radical parties. Moreover, we lack information on how out-partisans may perceive the credibility of such radical parties' messages.

In general, we expect that (right-wing) mainstream parties will have a greater impact on citizens' EU attitudes when sending an identical Euroskeptic message compared to parties with a radical (right-wing) ideology. We base our expectation on the assumptions that mainstream parties not only have a broader partisan base which will support the partisan message, but that they will also be judged as more credible by out-partisans. This leads us to our first hypothesis:

(H1) *A Euroskeptic message from a mainstream party will have a greater impact in general than the same message communicated by radical challenger parties (mainstream effect-hypothesis).*

Note, however, that in this hypothesis the two mechanisms of partisanship and source credibility are conflated. We will disentangle these in the following hypotheses and steps of analysis. Turning to the effects on in-partisans first, we expect classic cueing effects for partisans of mainstream as well as for partisans of radical parties. However, we assume these effects to vary in detail. For mainstream parties, we expect a Euroskeptic campaign message to have a negative effect on in-partisans' EU attitudes – even though such a message would contradict the classical pro-European party line. However, for partisans of radical parties with an extreme ideology, we expect a ceiling effect of partisan messages. Hence it is unlikely that such partisans turn even more negative towards Europe after the reception of just one campaign video. Unfortunately, we need to focus on mainstream partisans in our empirical analysis due to low case numbers of subjects affiliated with the radical party. Moreover, while we expect mainstream partisans to follow their own party, we also presume that they will not be affected by the same message when communicated by a radical party. This leads us to our second hypothesis:

*(H2) Euroskeptic cues of mainstream parties will affect their own partisans, whereas the same message communicated by a radical party has no effect on mainstream partisans (**partisan-hypothesis**).*

If this holds, then we expect that mainstream parties play the decisive role regarding the question of whether Euroskepticism generally increases in society.

Turning to the effects on out-partisans, we expect variation in propagating Euroskepticism between mainstream and radical parties due to differences in perceived source credibility. It is likely that messages sent by mainstream parties will be regarded as credible, whereas the same information transmitted by radical parties will lack credibility due to the status of the messenger itself. Consequently, we claim:

(H3a) *Among out-partisans, mainstream parties' enjoy higher source credibility compared to radical parties (**party credibility-hypothesis**).*

We expect this credibility bonus of the mainstream party's message to persist even if it is not in line with its traditional policy position. Furthermore, we expect that source credibility is crucial in persuading out-partisans. We therefore claim:

(H3b) *The effectiveness of a televised advertisement on out-partisans will depend on the source of the message, independently from its credibility (**source cue-hypothesis**).*

Alternatively, the effectiveness of the party message could also be mediated by the perceived credibility of the message itself (see Figure 1). Our final hypothesis therefore states:

(H3c) *The party effect on EU attitudes will be mediated by message credibility (**source & message credibility-hypothesis**).*

Figure 1

Before we turn to the results of our study, we will briefly describe our experimental design, the fieldwork, and the operationalization of our dependent and independent variables.

Methods

Fieldwork and Experimental Design

To test the effects of Eurosceptic messages of mainstream and radical challenger parties on citizens' EU attitudes, we conducted a survey experiment with two experimental groups using a German online access panel provided by the market research institute gfk, Nuremberg in May and June 2013. A quota sample was drawn taking into account the variables age, education, gender, and geographic region.² After a quality check, 679 interviews were rated as having good quality and were used for the analysis.³ Within the sample, 47% of the participants were female, and their average age was 44.9 years ($SD=14.0$); 25.8% had not graduated from secondary school, 36.5% had graduated from secondary school, 17.7% had qualified for university, and 20.0% had obtained a university degree.

As we are interested in understanding the role of different *messengers* communicating identical messages, we only manipulated the name of the party voicing the message in our treatment material. The challenge was to make it plausible that each of the cue-sending parties could propose such a Euroskeptic policy position (for a similar attempt, see Brader & Tucker 2012). We therefore first picked an ideologically right-wing challenger party (Die Republikaner) which has never been part of the German national parliament and which holds a strong Euroskeptic position (CHES-rating 1999: 1.75; see Bakker et al. 2015). As the second party, we chose the mainstream Christian Social Union (CSU), the Bavarian sister party of the large ruling conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in Germany, which belongs to the strongly pro-European group of Christian Democrats in the European Union. However, among German mainstream parties, the Bavarian CSU is the most Euroskeptical party (average CHES-rating 2010 and 2014: 4.90). It even broadcasted a rather Euroskeptical campaign ad at the beginning of the 2014 European election campaign. Still, the strong anti-EU message we used as stimulus material was on all accounts to be regarded as counter to the partisan line of the CSU – at least at the time of data collection in 2013. An alternative option which would have allowed an even more rigid test of the hypotheses would have been to choose the very pro-European governing CDU as comparator to the Republikaner. However, as the CDU holds very pro-European positions (average

CHES-rating 2010 and 2014: 6.19), we feared that participants would doubt the authenticity of our treatment material and therefore chose to use the CSU.

In our experiment, one group of participants was exposed to a quite substantial televised Euroskeptic campaign ad (see Web appendix) attributed to the mainstream party CSU (Group 1, n=241). The other experimental group was exposed to the same ad, however, the message was explicitly attributed to the radical challenger party (Republikaner; Group 2, n=240). In order to increase the external validity and credibility of the stimulus material, a real campaign advertisement that the Republikaner party had used in their 2009 European election campaign served as the basis. As we intended to test messages with a strong Eurosceptic tone – even opposing the general ideas of EU integration (for the concept of hard Euroskepticism, see Taggart & Szczerbiak 2004) – we manipulated the original material by increasing the negative evaluation of the EU in words and pictures. The only variation in the treatment material between the two experimental groups were partisan cues. Visually, we inserted party logos in each ad, and verbally, the name of the party sending the message was explicitly mentioned.⁴

In order to analyse treatment effects, we apply a three-step logic: First, to test the general effects of a Euroskeptic message sent by a mainstream and a radical party, we compare EU attitudes of all participants in each experimental group (Group 1, CSU;

Group 2, Republikaner) with a control group (Group 3, $n=198$) that was not exposed to any treatment. In this first step, effects of partisanship and message credibility are still confounded. Second, to detect effects of partisanship, we compare the reactions of in-partisans of the mainstream party in our two experimental groups (Group 1, CSU; Group 2, Republikaner). Third, in our search for credibility effects, we focus on out-partisans and compare their reactions in the two experimental groups (Group 1, CSU; Group 2, Republikaner) distinguishing between source and message credibility.

The survey started with a short introduction; participants were then randomly assigned to the two treatment groups and the control group. The randomisation of the experimental treatment was successful with respect to gender

$[X^2(2, N=679)=1.66, p=.44]$, education $[X^2(6, N=679)=5.40, p=.49]$, and age $[F(2)=.69, p=.50]$. As we expect that party preference (also see below) has an impact on the processing of the ads, it is important to rule out that our different experimental and control groups suffer from a partisan bias. As it turns out, this is not the case $[X^2(16, N=679)=19.07, p=.27]$. After the experimental treatment, participants were asked to fill out an online questionnaire including our measures of the dependent, moderator, and mediator variables.⁵

Dependent variables

Participants' EU attitudes were assessed with an index commonly used in EU research. It consists of four original questions (see also Hooghe and Marks 2005; Maier et al. 2012) assessing a) the European Union's overall image, b) the evaluation of Germany's EU membership, c) the evaluation of advantages and disadvantages Germany has from EU membership, and d) the evaluation of the EU's general performance. The index ranges from 1 ('very negative attitudes') to 5 ('very positive attitudes') and shows a Cronbach's alpha of .88 ($M=2.95$; $SD=.98$).

Moderator and Mediator

In accordance with the hypotheses, partisanship was used as a moderator and perceived credibility of the televised ad as a mediator for the analyses.

Partisanship was operationalized by the question, which political party participants would vote for if elections were held next Sunday. Based on their answers, participants were assigned to the following three groups: partisans of the mainstream party (CSU respectively its sister party CDU; $n=181$), partisans of the challenger party (Republikaner; $n=15$), and partisans of other parties or non-voters ("out-partisans"; $n=483$). Of course, most of the subjects subsumed in this last group have an attachment to German left-wing parties (Social Democrats (SPD): 30.6%; Green Party (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen): 19.3%; Left Party (Die Linke): 8.7%). Compared to this, preferences

for the Liberal Party (FDP: 8.7%) or the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD: 12.0%) are less frequent in this group. In addition, 22.8% of the participants in the out-partisan group have a preference for another party, are still undecided, or non-voters.

Perceived credibility of the televised ad used as experimental treatment was assessed by measuring respondents' agreement with the statement, "I can rely on the information given in the ad" (taken from the "Trust in News Media"-scale by Kohring and Matthes 2007) and measured on a 5-point scale running from 1 ('don't agree at all') to 5 ('fully agree').⁶ This item leaves open whether respondents refer to (1) source credibility or to (2) message credibility. Such a broad measurement strategy seems appropriate as respondents might not be able to disentangle both aspects of information credibility. However, both aspects can be separated in a two-step analysis. First, we compare credibility ratings between the two experimental groups, controlling for the propositions of the message and thus evaluating the remaining effect of source credibility. We then include the credibility ratings in a mediation analysis, differentiating between source and message credibility.

Results

According to H1 (*mainstream effect-hypothesis*), we expect that a right-wing mainstream party sending a Euroskeptic message will have a greater impact on citizens' EU attitudes than a party with a radical ideology sending the same Euroskeptic message. Table 1 shows the mean EU attitudes (measured by the EU attitude index) in the experimental groups after treatment exposure which are compared with the control group. The results indicate that Euroskeptic messages indeed yield an effect. First, a comparison between the two experimental groups and control group shows that those who watched the Euroskeptic advertisements have more negative attitudes towards Europe than those who were not exposed to a Euroskeptic message ($M=2.90$ vs. 3.07 ; $t=-2.06$, $df=677$, $p<.05$). However, it is only the message of the mainstream party (CSU) that has a negative effect significantly different from the mean value of the control group ($M=2.85$ vs. 3.07 ; $t=2.44$, $df=437$, $p<.05$), while the Euroskeptic message sent by the radical challenger party (Republikaner) does not yield any significant effect ($M=2.95$ vs. 3.07 ; $t=1.35$, $df=436$, $p>.05$). On this general level, we can thus confirm Hypothesis 1. However, we should be cautious not to overestimate the messenger effect as comparing both experimental groups with each other does not lead to statistically significant differences ($t=1.15$, $df=479$, $p>.05$).

Table 1.

H2 (*partisan-hypothesis*) expects a classic partisan cueing effect for the mainstream party CSU, namely that their partisans should tend to follow their preferred party's message, whereas they should not be affected by the identical message stemming from the radical challenger party. The results displayed in Table 2 fully support the assumption that mainstream partisans react strongly to their own party's message, whereas they do not react to the same message by the radical challenger party. A comparison between the different groups reveals that EU attitudes of supporters of the CDU/CSU differ significantly from the control group after watching a Euroskeptical ad from their "own" party ($M=2.87$ vs. 3.34 ; $t=2.71$, $df=120$, $p<.01$). In contrast to this, the Republikaner ad does not have any effect on partisans of the CDU/CSU ($M=3.14$ vs. 3.34 ; $t=1.14$, $df=108$, $p>.05$). Additional analyses indicate that the significant effect of the CSU ad on partisans' EU attitudes is actually caused by partisans of the CSU, i.e. citizens with residence in Bavaria. Compared to partisans of the sister-party CDU, i.e. citizens with residence in other parts of Germany, they react much more strongly to this ad. Compared to the control group, the difference in EU attitudes is significant only for supporters of the CSU ($M=2.30$ vs. 3.17 ; $t=2.19$, $df=31$, $p<.05$) but not for supporters of the CDU ($M=3.15$ vs. 3.38 ; $t=1.24$, $df=87$, $p>.05$). In addition, the difference between the CDU and CSU supporters is significant ($t=3.63$, $df=69$, $p<.01$). This result provides strong evidence for the existence of a mainstream partisan effect, meaning the message

of the preferred party is accepted, while the identical message sent by another party, even if it is the sister-party, has no effect.

Table 2.

While H2 asked about specific effects on the mainstream partisans, H3a and H3b focus on effects beyond the own partisan base. Here we expect that out-partisans can only be affected if they find the information they obtain credible. H3a assumes that mainstream parties enjoy higher source credibility compared to radical parties (*party credibility-hypothesis*). In Table 3, we compare the evaluations of the credibility of the televised ads used as treatment materials in different partisan groups. The difference between the groups indicates whether mainstream parties enjoy higher source credibility. Of course, according to our hypothesis a special focus lies on the out-partisans, i.e. all participants neither affiliated with CSU nor the Republikaner. As pointed out before, it must be noted that the treatment materials were based on a real campaign ad originally broadcast by the German Republikaner party and that the material varied only in respect to the visual and verbal references to the identity of the party sending the message.

Table 3.

On average, the perceived credibility of both ads is not rated as high, showing mean values clearly below the middle of the scale (3.0). However, on the aggregate level the perceived credibility of the two ads differs significantly between the treatment groups. The ad that was allegedly sent by the mainstream party CSU is evaluated as more credible than the ad allegedly sent by the radical party Republikaner ($M=2.46$ vs. 2.12 ; $t=3.21$, $df=479$, $p<.01$). However, there is no statistically significant difference in the evaluation of the CSU and the Republikaner advertisement by out-partisans ($M=2.20$ vs. 2.06 ; $t=1.15$, $df=335$, $p>.05$). Therefore, we have to reject H3a. As a consequence, the greater impact of the mainstream party sending a Euroskeptic message (H1) is due to its larger partisan base but not due to its higher source credibility among out-partisans.

The relationship between messenger, perceived message credibility, and effects on out-partisans' EU attitudes is displayed in Figure 2, which shows the results from a mediation analysis with message credibility being the mediator (M) and EU attitudes serving as the dependent variable (Y). Employing Hayes' PROCESS tool (Hayes, 2015; <http://afhayes.com/index.html>), we are able to report an indirect treatment effect of both Euroskeptical advertisements on EU attitudes, which is fully mediated by message credibility (IND=.03, BootSE=.03; 95% BootCI [-.02, .10]): people assess the message credibility based on the provided source cue (arrow a), and this evaluation affects their EU attitudes (arrow b). The direct treatment effect – which would indicate the

independent relevance of source credibility – is not significant if the mediator is included ($b=.04$, $SE=.10$; $p=.702$). Based on these findings, we have to reject H3b (*source cue-hypothesis*) that source credibility is crucial for the persuasiveness of parties' messages independently from their message credibility and instead support H3c (*source & message credibility-hypothesis*) that a message which is perceived as credible due to the provided source cue has an effect on out-partisans' EU attitudes.

Figure 2

Summary and Discussion

Which parts of the political elite have the potential to increase Euroskeptic attitudes within the electorate? Does it make any difference who is communicating Euroskeptic messages? The results of our experimental study on the effects of identical Euroskeptic messages – one brought forward by the German mainstream party CSU and one given by the radical challenger party Die Republikaner – show that a mainstream party sending Euroskeptic messages has a greater potential to impact citizens' EU attitudes. First, for the mainstream party, we were able to show a strong partisan effect. We found that Euroskepticism voiced in a campaign advertisement by a mainstream party is effective among the own partisans even though the content of the ad contradicts the party line. The same ad, however, did not show this effect on mainstream partisans if

voiced by a radical challenger party. This means that under the current political and social conditions in Germany, mainstream parties do play a decisive role in reference to the question whether Euroskepticism can influence society as a whole. Second, mainstream parties can reach beyond their own partisan base if the recipients perceive the advertisement as credible. However, the mainstream ad is not perceived as significantly more credible by out-partisans than an identical radical challenger ad. This has two implications. First, the mainstream party's currently wider reach mainly seems to stem from its greater partisan base. Second, in a different political and social situation, in which more citizens might become open to or even supportive of Euroskeptic ideas, the impact of radical Euroskeptic messages could increase significantly and also reach far beyond the partisan base of Euroskeptic parties.

These findings stress the relevance of the topic also for future research. First, the finding that partisans of the German mainstream party appear so vulnerable to Euroskeptic campaign messages is astonishing given the quite positive EU evaluation of German mainstream elites. It would be worth analyzing which in-partisans are affected (e.g., is it only those partisans who have ambivalent attitudes towards the EU who are likely to pick up the Euroskeptic message?; see, e.g., Steenbergen and De Vries 2012; Zaller 1992), and which citizens realize that the conveyed message contradicts the mainstream party's line. Further, does this result of strong partisan effects also transfer

to other mainstream parties and their partisans with less inclination to go Euroskeptic, e.g., to Social Democrats (SPD)?

Second, the finding that a substantial part of our sample is willing to ascribe some form of credibility to the advertisement of the radical party is surprising given the fact that there is no social consensus in Germany for the messenger (Republikaner). If right-wing challengers play a role in forming Euroskeptical attitudes even in this situation, we should study which impact radical Euroskeptics have on citizens' attitudes in political systems in which they are no longer considered socially unacceptable, but well established (e.g., Front National in France or Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs in Austria). In addition, situations in which non-mainstream parties are regarded as competent in EU matters and where they attack mainstream parties in this regard (e.g., UK Independence Party in the UK) offer great opportunities for cross-country comparisons regarding the role of source credibility for the effectiveness of mainstream and challenger parties' EU-related campaign messages.

Finally, our results clearly demonstrate that a message needs to be judged credible to be persuasive. Here, we could not detect differences in credibility attributions of out-partisans between our two treatment groups,. On the other side, we find 38% (CSU ad) and 33% (Republikaner ad) of out-partisans rating the advertisements at least as partly

credible, causing significant persuasion effects in our mediation analysis. This then leaves us with the open question concerning the criteria on which respondents base their message credibility ratings.

Of course, our study is not without caveats. While our findings provide a clear picture regarding the effectiveness of Euroskeptic campaign messages of mainstream and radical challenger parties' on citizens in general, in many parts of the analysis the group of partisans of radical challenger party was too small to allow differentiated conclusions. This problem results from the representative sampling strategy and an insufficient number of subjects with a preference for the radical challenger party.

However, it seems worthwhile to assess the effects of party campaigns on partisans of radical parties more precisely. Moreover, our experiment cannot answer the question to which degree our results can be generalized. Possibly, Euroskeptic communication leads to different dynamics in other countries where right-wing Euroskeptics are already well-established. This calls for comparative research on the relevance of country-contexts for the effectiveness of Euroskeptic messages which might allow us to understand the variation in the success of Euroskeptic parties in the last European Parliament elections.

Notes

1. It is important to note that party identification and credibility are not independent: For in-partisans, the perception of source and message credibility is influenced by party attachment (see, e.g., Campbell et al. 1960). However, according to current research, credibility should be a distinct factor of message evaluation for out-partisans.
2. The gfk online panel is representative for online users in Germany. However, because the representation of the total citizenship was important for our study, a quota sample was drawn taking into account the variables age, education, gender, and geographic region. The quotas were chosen in accordance with the distribution of the criterion in the total national population. A deviation of 20% from the specific quota was regarded as tolerable.
3. Initially, 1758 people were invited to participate in the study per email. Of the 1752 persons who responded, a quota sample of 1089 persons was drawn taking into account the variables age, education, gender, and geographic region. The selected participants received a link to the online-questionnaire; one reminder was sent out to increase the response-rate. The quality of the interviews was ensured by using the GfK-tool TIGO. This tool a) detects specific patterns of participants' answers to standardized questions (e.g., straightlining); b) evaluates the length of answers to open questions; and c) takes into account the time that a

participant spent in filling out the questionnaire (min. 11 minutes, max. 60 minutes). Interviews which were evaluated as “not satisfactory” according to these criteria were removed from the sample ($N = 44$). In addition, 125 incomplete interviews were excluded. 241 participants belonged to a third treatment group which received a positive campaign advertisement as treatment and which is not considered in this analysis.

4. The wording of the advertisements can be found in the Web appendix to this paper.
5. Participants assigned to the control group filled out the questionnaire without being exposed to any treatment. The wording of all variables can be found in the Web appendix.
6. Message credibility in this paper is conceptualized as one predictor of the persuasiveness of party ads and theoretically distinct from the dependent variable (EU attitudes). The empirical correlation between perceived ad credibility and the dependent variable supports our argument that both concepts are theoretically related but not identical ($r = -.31$; $p < .001$; $N = 481$).

Acknowledgements

Our work on this paper was supported by grants from The Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS) as well as by the

Research Network 'Communication, Media and Politics' at the University of Koblenz-Landau to Michaela Maier, Silke Adam and Jürgen Maier. We thank Julian Erben, Stefan Krause, Andrea Retzbach, and Frank Schneider for their work on the development of the instruments.

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Table 1. Effects of a Euroskeptical campaign message sent by a mainstream and a radical right-wing challenger party on EU attitudes

	Mean	SD	N
Both treatment groups	2.90 ^a	.98	481
Sender of Euroskeptical Message			
Mainstream Party (=CSU)	2.85 ^a	.98	241
Challenger Party (=Republikaner)	2.95	.97	240
Control group	3.07	.97	198
Level of significance (difference between treatment group and control group): a: $p < .05$, b: $p < .01$, c: $p < .001$.			

Table 2. Moderating effects between preference for a mainstream party (CDU/CSU) and sender of a Euroskeptical campaign message on EU attitudes

	Mean	SD	N
Sender of Euroskeptical Message			
Mainstream Party (=CSU)	2.87 ^b	1.01	71
Challenger Party (=Republikaner)	3.14	.96	59
Control group	3.34	.90	51
Level of significance (difference between treatment group and control group): a: $p < .05$, b: $p < .01$, c: $p < .001$.			

Table 3. Perceived credibility of Euroskeptical messages by party preference

Sender of Euroskeptical Message	Preference for							
	Total		CDU/CSU		Republikaner		Other/no Party ("out-partisans")	
	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N
Mainstream Party (=CSU)	2.46 ^b	241	3.03 ^c	71	3.00	4	2.20	166

Challenger Party (=Republikaner)	2.12	240	2.12	59	3.20	10	2.06	171
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Level of significance (difference between the two treatment groups): a: $p < .05$, b: $p < .01$, c: $p < .001$.